Larger, More Capable Navy Needed, SECDEF Says



Defense Secretary Mark Esper prepares to participate in a Brookings Institution webinar on May 4. Defense Department/Marvin Lynchard

ARLINGTON, Va. — The nation's top defense official said the U.S. armed forces need to shed some legacy forces for a more modern force, one that includes more modern naval forces.

"We need a larger, more capable Navy that can implement distributed lethality across the seven seas," Defense Secretary Mark Esper said, speaking May 4 in a webcast hosted by the Brookings Institution, a Washington think tank. "The Marines are doing some really innovative things with regard to how they are adjusting their force."

Esper said the Defense Department needs 3% to 5% annual real growth year-over-year in the budget topline to increase readiness and support the National Defense Strategy.

Noting the probability of flat defense budgets and given the national debt and COVID-19 virus effects on the gross domestic product, Esper said he is worried that the "massive infusion of dollars into the economy … may throw us off that course … and lead to smaller defense budgets in the future."

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He said that the Defense Department is at a critical juncture with the “Great Power Competition” against China and Russia.

“That means shedding the legacy force and moving to a more modern force,” Esper said, noting that a modern force would include completely revitalized strategic forces — including all three legs of the nuclear triad (bombers, intercontinental ballistic missiles and submarine-launched ballistic missiles) — “but also investing a lot of money into [artificial intelligence], into hypersonics, into our space capabilities, cyber, into directed energy.”

He said that the Air-Land Battle Concept has been replaced by the Joint Warfighting Concept “that will make sure we’re fighting in all domains as a coherent, cohesive joint force. We have new plans to reach out to our allies and partners and make sure they are well-integrated into all of our efforts.”

The secretary emphasized readiness concepts underway, including immediate-reaction forces and contingency-reaction forces as well as dynamic force employment and “moving toward operational deployments rather than permanently deployed forces.”

“That said, we do need that topline growth, and if we don’t [get it], we’re just going to have to accelerate that shedding of the legacy force and turning those dollars back into building the force we need in the future.”